COMMENT ON THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SHAME

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ABSTRACT

Shame is neither a purely social nor a merely sexual phenomenon. Its universality points to a fundamental pattern of human life. Shame has a function in a process of formation which is both individual and social. This functional meaning can be constant though the contents of shame vary and change. An analysis of the connotations of the words for shame in different languages suggests the relation between shame and awe. *Pudenda* and *veneranda* are interrelated.

I

Anthropologists, in comparing cultures, find different tribes ashamed of different things. Obviously they could not make such comparisons unless they had a certain knowledge of an attitude called shame as distinct from the contents of shame, the *pudenda*. The variations the anthropologists report seem to concern the content, not the attitude. In many a study of the genesis of social norms man is a clean slate on which different conditions write different stories. Shame, we are told, has to do with habits. Habits are products of yesterday's conditions. But how is it that each of the different stories has a chapter about shame? Everywhere man blushes and conceals. Human life, under all conditions, seems to move within the frame of a fundamental pattern in which an attitude called shame may have a hidden place.

The phenomenon called shame is broad. Man, as his own observer, can be ashamed of things of which no one knows. It is not a matter of course that the individual is ashamed of merely violating the moral code of the group to which he belongs. Nor is it a matter of course that shame should be tied up with sex. A human being can be ashamed of a cowardly or mean act that even the psychoanalyst may fail to connect with sex. Man can be ashamed of himself and his actions or of others—friends, parents, children—and their actions, ashamed even of his country.

At the threshold of any inquiry into human attitudes and emotions we stumble over a difficulty that concerns the relations between things and their names. In different languages the same things have different names: stone, flower, horse. The name, then, does not alter the thing. But emotions or attitudes merge into one another in countless nuances, transitions, and mixtures. There are no sharp, unmistakable frontiers. Different languages do not draw exactly the same distinctions. Where the human heart is concerned, languages seem to be attempts to lay hands on an evasive subject matter. Each tries to solve an unsolvable problem in its own, and never entirely satisfactory, manner. We admire the subtleness of one for the shades of emotion it can express and deplore the clumsiness of another.

Names lead our thinking, but they do not create things; whenever they seem to create things, these things are not necessarily the right ones. At any rate, we do not determine what shame is by determining the meaning of the term, that is, the conventional use of "shame" in English. English and German have one word for "shame"—*Scham;* French and Greek each have two: *pudeur* and *honte*, *Aischyne* and *Aidos*. The use of two words emphasizes a difference; the use of

one, in blurring the difference, stresses a kinship. Each usage may have its strength and its weakness.

Let us begin with a simple case. A mother scolds her child for a mean act. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" "Schämst du dich nicht?" "N'as-tu pas honte?" Mothers in all civilizations talk in this or a similar manner to their children, whatever moral or social code determines the things of which the child should be ashamed. The attitude called shame may be the same, though the content may be different.

A boy is eager to ride on a pony. A little afraid, he hesitates. The mother reproves him: "Aren't you ashamed?" Even if she adds, "Imagine if someone saw that you are afraid," she wants her son to be ashamed of himself as his own observer. Do we really need the social group and its moral code demanding courage? There is something in the soul of the boy that corresponds to the moral code of courage and to the motherly reprimand; without this something the boy would hardly respond.

Perhaps the mother can teach him merely the things of which he should be ashamed, thus directing his shame toward certain contents. To an entirely shameless being, shame cannot be taught. The teacher of such a being could only substitute fear for shame.

What part in an appeal to shame does the observer play? He does not represent merely a social or moral code imposed from without. The boy is anxious lest someone see that he is afraid. He tries to conceal his fear, at least from others; not because shame is merely social and always with respect to others, but because, if others know, the fact is established and his image of himself is put beyond his own power of forgetting and remembering. One cannot prevent others from knowing unless one possesses the power of killing. A powerful man, wishing to save his own image of himself, may on that ground alone cause another man to die.

Though not "merely" social, shame is still a social phenomenon. The individual himself is a social phenomenon. The boy builds up an image of himself for others as well as for himself. He cannot help being to himself what he is to others. His life in others is part of himself. He wants to be something to others. If he cannot be what he wants to be, he tries to appear to be what he cannot be. If he is not contented with himself as others see him, he tries to console himself with his own self-image; if he does not approve of his self-image, he seeks consolation in what others think about him. We adjust ourselves to the norms of others and try to adjust others to our norms. Our "being-to-others" and our "being-to-ourselves" are not side by side. They have been correlated ever since man's beginning. Life is their give and take, the play of their concord and discord.

Shame is a phenomenon as old, if not older, than man. What is its function?

Man, in being something to himself, behaves toward himself. Even in behaving toward others, he cannot help behaving toward himself. He can love and hate, respect and despise himself. He can be content and angry with himself. He can be truthful and a liar to himself. This behaving toward himself does not presuppose introspection, self-observation, a conscious act in which a man directs his attention toward his self. The phenomenon springs the bounds of these terms. Man is a finite creature, in need and danger. He is moved and acted upon. But in being moved he moves; in being acted upon he acts. He builds up his world in relation to himself, himself in relation to his world. Since he is finite,

his world is never quite the world. The self he builds is never quite his self. He is both creator and creatum. There is a double nature in man, but the creator is not necessarily the creatum. When we say that man builds up his "self" we should realize that the builder is not the building. We can differentiate the I and the Me. At any moment the I puts another Me, which should be and perhaps never will be actual, ahead of the actual Me. The I may even draw beyond all actual Me's an image of a Me for his own eyes or for the eyes of others, believing and making believe. The distinction between an unconscious and a conscious ego by no means corresponds to this distinction between the I and the Me. Both the unconscious and the conscious have their share in this formative process and a part in both the I and the Me. In this process in which a finite creator builds up his self as his creatum shame resides. It covers and conceals the vulnerable spots and protects man against himself and against others. The root of the English "shame" and the German "Scham" is in a Gothic word "Schama" which signifies cover and which is also the root of the German "Hemd," shirt, and the English and French "chemise."

II

To begin from another angle, wise men in all countries and ages have advised their friends never to put a man to shame lest they create a kind of hate keener than the hate from any other source and slower to heal. Man resents being put to shame, being compelled to confront not only others but also himself, bared in all his meanness. There is no doubt about the strength and tenacity of the resentment created. The less the opportunity left a man to save his face, at least in his own eyes, the deeper and more persistent the resentment. The reason the needy find it difficult to be grateful for help and gifts is because they are prone to be ashamed of their neediness. The man who puts us to shame interferes in the delicate process by which the I builds up the Me. If such interference destroys the unconscious work, the response of many a man is hate.

Whenever parents and teachers, in educating children, put them to shame they take or should take care, that they merely guide and do not disturb their children's development. To this end, they should avoid shaming a child before strangers. Enmity, on the other hand, prefers to shame in the presence of others and gloats over the moral destruction in which the I of the foe faces the debris of his Me.

To avoid putting anyone to shame is the first commandment of a social code, called "tact," one of the few that can be formulated. Tact is common to all civilizations and not merely a refinement of an advanced society. If tact is not confused with good manners, we may discover that primitive tribes or free peasants are distinguished by their native tact. This kind of tact may lead us to some fundamental norms that hardly change in history, provided they are formulated in terms of man's relation to man. Not to put a man to shame is one of these norms.

In social life, in both fiction and reality, there are what we call embarrassing situations. Social tact demands that we avoid creating such a situation. Whenever someone is openly put to shame, we suffer even as mere observers with the person involved. We cannot help feeling his shame. This phenomenon points to the queer fact that social life tends to be sociable. It creates, always and everywhere, certain norms of behavior as th

basis of sociability. Some of these norms do not change. Sociability presupposes some feeling for the ways of others—the will not to hurt, not to touch sensitive spots, not to disclose delicate secrets at the bottom of other souls, not to disparage the things others venerate. It demands something that could be called a sixth sense, a feeling in the tips of one's fingers, a kind of intuition of the other fellow's subconscious bases or of the formative process in which his I builds up his Me. This process is everyone's secret unknown to himself. It should be respected. If it is not, friendship is not friendly and social life not sociable.

There is much talk about inferiority complexes. The term means a behavior of man toward himself, a particular relation between the I and the Me. The proprietors of inferiority complexes are unconsciously ashamed of themselves. They waver between depressions and attacks of hatred; extremely suspicious, they ascribe to everyone they meet the contempt in which they hold themselves. Goethe complains of people:

> denen das Wesen wie du bist
> stets ein stiller Vorwurf ist.

They are avid for praise, public honor, or visible success, hoping in vain to convince themselves of a value with which they cannot credit themselves. When put to shame, they neither forgive nor forget. Retaliation, even success, is no cure. Resentment is one of the most potent forces in history and can give to both individuals and social groups the vigor essential to conquer the realms of happier but perhaps weaker people who, pleased with themselves, acquiesce in an accomplished unity between the I and the Me. Experience decides against the smug. The tension between the creator and the creatum alone gives strength. Man's essence is motion; he is a being directed in itself that is never entirely what it wants or ought to be. This is but another way of expressing what I call the tension between the I and the Me. It belongs to the structure of a formative process in which shame has its function.

III

Shame is so closely connected with sex that many seem almost to forget that there are things apart from sex of which man can be ashamed. Our Christian tradition suggests that sexual matters are sinful and therefore things to be ashamed of. The association of a bad conscience with sexuality as such is a Christian peculiarity. But it was not Christianity that brought shame into sex.

We ought to be very careful ere we assume that there are "shameless" tribes. Numerous tribes seem shameless according to our codes. They have their own codes, however, within which our acts do not have our meanings. Their codes, however shameless they may seem to us, differentiate as well as ours between shame and shamelessness. Nature herself seems to connect sex with shame. Every inquiry into this problem meets great difficulties. The preconceptions in our theories of sex prevent us from discovering the facts. Some people even distort the facts before trying to observe them.

A few undeniable facts that concern different functions of shame in matters of sex may help to articulate the problem, at least in a preliminary way. The phenomena are tender; words are harsh.

1. Shame asks for the concealment of our sexual actions. It guards their privacy. All peoples exclude the observer. The observer or he who consents to being observed is shameless. Thus shame seems to be concerned less with the sexu-

al actions themselves than with their observation. Talk offends more than action. Mephisto says in Faust:

Du darfst es nicht vor keuschen Ohren nennen,
Was keusche Herzen nicht entbehren koennen.

The devil, shameless by nature, sneers at what he fails to understand. Though codes differ widely, we may say that within each the offense to shame by talk is greater the less familiar people are with one another. Societies that admit, relish, or even cultivate a way of talking about sex that to puritans seems utterly shameless have their own way of bowing before shame. They usually develop a code of their own which stipulates at least that the veil shall not be removed unless with wit or grace.

2. All peoples require a sense of shame in youngsters, especially in young girls. Shame suits youth and protects the growth of sexual maturity. It plays a role in the selection of the first sexual companion. The nurse upbraids Juliet: "Have you no modesty, no maiden shame?" Everyone makes allowance to Juliet for the strength of her passion. She may violate the social code as interpreted by nurses; she does not violate the human code. Each of her sweet words is full of "modesty and maiden shame." Obviously our judgment of whether an attitude is shameless or not depends on the presence or absence of a mysterious something called "love," whatever it may be.

In Sanskrit the word for shame means the reserve and defense that in the game of love is appropriate to the female part even in the eyes of the libidinous male. Poets of most ages and countries praise this sort of shame. As males writing for audiences of males, they suggest that to love alone should shame yield through love.

Obviously we cannot deal with shame in sex without introducing love. Love is not coextensive with sex. There is sex without love and perhaps even love without sex. Since, however, man has fancied that he could reduce love, as a sublimation of a biological urge, to sex, a few words in defense of my view are a necessity today. I am not sure whether the word "sublimation" has a definite meaning. It seems to me that its role is to desublimate love by suggesting that love is nothing but sex, i.e., a biological urge. Armed with such a preconception, the psychologist does not have to describe the sublimation and look at what really happens between a man and a woman in love besides the satisfaction of a biological urge. Hence the blindness in the modern scientific literature concerning matters of Eros. I do not dare to set forth a theory of love. When I use the word, I refer to the plain fact that relations between human beings can be such that the I and the You build up a We as the whole of an intimate world in which they are obliged to be to themselves what they are to each other and are permitted to be to each other what they are to themselves.[1] This phenomenon cannot be reduced to sex, though it may require and create, or be required and created by, sexual intercourse. Shame seems to safeguard the youthful genesis of love against the biological urge and thus to watch over the sublimation of sex.

3. The further role shame plays between two sexual companions depends on love. Mutual love banishes shame. In a sexual intercourse that we imagine to be the mere satisfaction of a biological urge and without a tinge of love shame insists on being present; without love,

[1] Cf. my article, "Jack and Jill," a comment on some basic sociological concepts, in *Social Research*, November, 1939.

the companion becomes the observer. Shame decreases with increasing love, increases with decreasing love. It takes its leave when love reaches its peak and reappears when love takes its leave. Shame protects love in sex against sex without love.

The matter is so delicate, however, that the more precise one tries to be the more inadequate the description becomes. It seems to shun bright light. Are we really right in saying that shame disappears in passionate love? Perhaps we should say that it merely changes its code. Intimacy seems to prescribe and create its special code, a subtle thing, which guards the I against the You as well as the You against the I and perhaps even the We against both the I and the You. We may say that this fragile thing is not shame but tact. Tact, however, implies shame. Mutual tact respects mutual shame.

These meager remarks merely indicate a diversity of function under different conditions. Even they, however, give an outline that thorough analysis can certainly enrich but scarcely alter. I am aware of the countless variations in each civilization or period that enliven the story of shame with unique shades and inflections. But historic interest should not induce the student of human nature to miss the sameness of the theme. The melody is faint but audible.

The melody, the same despite all the variable *pudenda* and their diverse manifestations, compels us to admit a meaning of shame that is not a creation of man-made moral codes or of interests of social groups. This shame is not a *creatum* but part of the inner structure of a creative process in which men build up their selves and their countless worlds. The contents of shame, the *pudenda*, depend upon the different worlds man creates; shame itself preserves the sameness of its function provided we are careful to determine it in terms of an inner structure of human life instead of using the identities of a material world as the frame of reference.

Although Nature dislikes to divulge her secret, I may inquire whether the language is right in using one and the same word for shame both in and outside sex.

We react to both kinds of shame in one and the same way: we blush and we conceal. Since the reaction does not depend upon social codes or historical changes we might follow the lead Nature seems to indicate. In and outside sex shame prevents us from doing what, if done, would make us blush and conceal. Shame guides a process of formation and shields its vulnerable spots, solicitous for what is frail and fragile. This may be our own Self, the Me or the image of the Me in our own eyes or in the eyes of others. It may even be another self, in whose name we feel shame or whom we avoid putting to shame. It may be the privacy of our sexual life, the mysterious something called love, its growth or its intimacy, the We and its barriers. Shame stresses the secret. Every creator has his secret, beyond his *creata*.

Both the French and the Greek use two words. Their distinction, however, does not correspond to the distinction between sexual and nonsexual matters. *Pudeur* means a kind of shame that tends to keep you from an act, whereas you may feel *honte* after an act. Customary loose usage tends to blur the distinction and to forget that you may feel *pudeur* outside sex and *honte* within sex.

IV

The Greek distinction between *Aidos* and *Aischyne* does not correspond to the

French between *pudeur* and *honte;* nor has it anything to do with a distinction between sexual and nonsexual matters. The old grammarians[2] define: "*Aidos* est pudor profectus ex verecundia. *Aischyne* est pudor profectus ex turpitudine." The origin of *Aischyne* is dishonor, of *Aidos*, awe. Dishonor puts the emphasis on man-made codes. If you are ashamed of violating or having violated such codes, the Greeks use the verb that corresponds to the noun *Aischyne*. *Aidos* is not concerned merely with man-made codes. You feel *Aidos* when confronted with things nature tells you to revere and not violate. Shame in sexual matters is *Aidos*, not *Aischyne*. In the *Odyssey* Hephaistos catches his wife, Aphrodite, with her lover, Ares, in nets he spread around Aphrodite's bed. He calls all the gods and goddesses to look at the adulterous couple. The gods hurry to the place, but the goddesses stay at home out of shame. Homer calls this shame *Aidos*.

A mighty personality, be it a king, poet, or philosopher, is *Aidoios*. *Aidoia* is the word for the sexual organs. You feel *Aidos* when you enter a temple, a holy grove, the shadow of a cave, the dark of a wood. These things have a secret you should respect. In the courts of Attica the defendant had his place beside a stone dedicated to *Aidos;* the stone on the opposite side, the place of the prosecutor, was dedicated to *Anaideia*, shamelessness. The one is entitled to conceal, the other obliged to unmask.

In Euripides' tragedy, *Hippolytos*, the pure youth, Hippolytos, enters the holy grove of Artemis at dawn and offers the goddess a crown of flowers.

My Goddess Mistress, I bring you ready woven
This garland. It was I that plucked and wove it,
Plucked it for you in your Inviolate Meadow.
No shepherd dares to feed his flock within it:
No reaper plies a busy scythe within it:
Only the bees in springtime haunt the Inviolate Meadow.
Its gardener is the *Spirit Reverence* who
Refreshes it with water from the river.
Not those who by instruction have profited
To learn, but in whose very soul the seed
Of Chastity towards all things alike
Nature has deeply rooted, they alone
May gather flowers there! the wicked may not.[3]

The *Spirit Reverence* of the translation is *Aidos*. These lines, I think, are eloquent enough to disclose the particular flavor of the term. We should not disregard the wisdom of such wording as an arbitrariness of a language, or a Greek peculiarity that may interest the historian alone. *Aidos* links shame to awe: this link may be in the things themselves, whether or not the language retains it in the connotations of its words.

Shame is rooted, as I have said, in the formative process we call the life of man. So is awe. Shame protects, awe guides this process. Man is a being directed toward a whither—creative but finite. As he is finite, he is in need and danger, dependent on things that are beyond his power. Thus he is bound to take heed lest he go astray. As he is creative he is bound to revere consciously or unconsciously, building up before himself an image and tending to transcend every present actuality of his Self. It is in the name of such an image that shame warns, protects, and conceals. As a finite being endowed with a bit of creativity gropes its way, it is, in any phase, both limping behind and running ahead of itself: between shame and awe. Neither a noncreative finite being nor an infinite creator can feel either shame or awe.

[2] *Thesaurus Stephani*, under *Aidos*. Others quoted, Damascenus, Aristoxenus, Ammonius, stress the same point.

[3] Translation by David Grene, *Three Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

Both God and the devil, the infinite creator and the infinite destroyer, are beyond shame and awe.

V

If a boy is ashamed of wearing childish pants, he looks up to another kind of pants he or his group holds in higher esteem. *Pudenda* and *veneranda* imply each other. Behind every *pudendum* is hidden a *venerandum*, though man may refuse to recognize it as such. *Pudenda* may lose their *veneranda*. You may inherit a *pudendum;* its origin may be a *venerandum* of a social group of times forgotten. *Pudenda*, in outliving their *veneranda*, outlive themselves.

History tells a tale of impervious complexity. Civilizations, social groups of all kinds, individuals as they grow, build up systems of *pudenda* and *veneranda*. These systems may be called moral, social, or religious codes, rules of taboo and mana, or have no name at all. They may be conscious, half-conscious, or unconscious. They tend to be systems. Man tends to build up his self and his world as consistent wholes, not as aggregates. As a social group or an individual develops, aggregates converge toward a focus. An elaborate whole is shaped. In this process man adjusts conditions to himself as well as himself to conditions. An "environment" becomes a "world." In achieving a personality man drops those of his *pudenda* and *veneranda*, opinions or lines of behavior which were merely casual, or alters their functions and meanings, relates the one to the other, or shapes new habits that are less casual, thus building up himself, his "world," the conscious or unconscious norms of his behavior as a consistent whole. A civilization tends to follow the same pattern. The focus of this unity remains beyond our conscious thinking. In both a strong personality and a high civilization we recognize the fact by admiring its secret.

As civilizations decay *pudenda* and *veneranda* become anemic; systems disintegrate into aggregates. Life quits the fragments. Man inherits petrified habits. Mothers still transmit to children pieces of a forgotten whole. Children outgrow fear and learn to disregard the lifeless pieces. Rules of mana and taboo in primitive tribes often seem to us but aggregates of unconnected superstitions. The tribes may have still better excuses for the inconsistency of their *pudenda* and *veneranda* than we have for ours. They may be very old, stabilized products of a long history they do not remember.

Growth and decay, however, are interwoven; most periods are both young and old at the same time. The official system of *pudenda* and *veneranda* need not be the real system; it may be but the system of yesterday and still govern institutions and terms, though no longer acts. Moreover, the real system governing the acts of parents and teachers may not be the real system of their children. While parents complain that their children have neither shame nor reverence, children may be shaping a system of their own, which sometimes promises to be both more consistent and more honest.

Since the individual shapes his self and builds his world in relation to others to whom he wants to be what he is to himself and cannot help that his being-to-others is part of his being-to-himself, growth and decay of individual and social systems are interlocked. The individual itself is a social, and sociability an individual, phenomenon. In a tensile civilization the system of *pudenda* and *veneranda* is the framework of the particular social systems built by individuals or groups; in a loosened civilization they

are often merely *disjecta membra* thrown together into jerry-built edifices. During all the phases of this indefatigable process of dependency and creation, shame and awe hold hands. Wherever there is still some creativity they are present. "Shameless" times, if there are any, are periods of destruction. So are times without any kind of awe. But even in such times shame and awe are present by their very absence—as need and want in human hearts.

As we move, the mental, social, or moral space in which we live goes on moving. Nevertheless, the codes of shame and awe may change; shame and awe themselves are not products of history but structural elements of the process itself and therefore neither younger nor older than man, though probably older than God and the devil.

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